DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 817 HE 034 490

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TITLE	Transitions between Tiers in U.S. News and World Report Rankings of Colleges and Universities.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	29p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Change; *Colleges; *Educational Improvement; Educational Quality; Higher Education; *Institutional Characteristics; Periodicals
IDENTIFIERS	*Ranking

ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether changes occur frequently in the ratings of colleges by "U.S. News and World Report." The annual rankings of colleges receive considerable publicity and are taken quite seriously by the media and the public. The three lowest tiers of colleges are not ranked. The study was intended to determine how much movement occurs in those ratings, whether rising or falling. Ratings for 6 years (1996 through 2001) were studied for 162 nationally ranked 4-year liberal arts colleges, and the study was replicated with colleges from Southern Region that offered master's level programs. At the national level, change occurred in 14% of the opportunities, so that most of the year-to-year comparisons showed no change. There were very few institutions that appeared less than six times in the rankings. At the regional level, change occurred in 19% of the opportunities. In general, there was sufficient stability within the rankings to make one take a skeptical view of efforts to improve an institution's rankings. At the same time, the findings bode well for those institutions that are satisfied with their rankings. (Contains 9 figures and 13 references.) (SLD)

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Transitions Between Tiers in U.S. News and World Report Rankings of Colleges and Universities

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Each year the *U. S. News and World Report* publishes rankings of colleges and universities in the United States. As a guide to college applicants and their parents, these rankings, it is believed, are taken quite seriously. Decisions affecting innumerable academic careers are at stake; from the standpoint of competitive higher education institutions, these stakes are high. Since colleges and universities recognize the impact that these published rankings (and many others) can have, the leaders of many of these institutions are eager to improve their standing. Thus, presidents, admissions officers and others pay particularly close attention to the rankings and the criteria that influence them, undoubtedly aspiring to influence their own institutions in a way that will have a positive impact on the ratings and the benefits that will follow.

Perspectives from the Literature

Rankings of academic quality have been a part of the U.S. academic scene for approximately 100 years (Webster, 1992). Today, national rankings have become widely read and fundamentally a big business[1] thanks in large part to U. S. News & World Report, which began publishing reputational rankings of U.S. colleges based on a survey of college presidents in 1983 (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1997) and has become the "gold standard" of the ranking business (Ehrenberg, 2001). Furthermore, the influence of the USNWR and other rankings is likely to increase because of their ready availability on the Internet (Webster, 2001).

[1] McDonough et al. (1997) estimate that total revenue from the various newsmagazines that publish college rankings and guidebooks reach $16,000,000 a year in sales alone.

USNWR ranking has long been the subject of widespread criticism for their use of "soft data," use of questionable or (some say) meaningless criteria, arbitrary weighting schemes, and technical difficulties (e.g., Gottlieb, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Webster, 2001; Wright, 1992). In fact, the editors of USNWR have gone out of their way to change their methodology on an annual basis in order to mollify their college critics (Machung, 1995; McDonough et al., 1997, Morse, 1995).

Arguably, a major reason why U.S. News & World Report rankings have become so immensely popular and influential is not because they have been useful for college choice but primarily because colleges and universities have aggressively used them to promote themselves (Machung, 1998).

The tier rankings are important for college and university administrators because they partly define the institution's market niche, influence the perception of the institution by prospective students, which affects enrollments and operating budgets, and serve as a guide to the institution's strategic planning (Webster, 2001).

The January 1997 issue of State Policy Reports highlighted a relationship between school quality ratings and the return on investment that states receive for their support of public higher education, thus making the suggestion to tie college funding to ranking status (Hovey, 1997).

Monks and Ehrenberg (1999) analyzed the changes in USNWR ranking for the top national universities and liberal arts colleges and found that "a change in rank does have a significant influence on admissions outcomes and institutional pricing decisions . . . these in turn will have an impact on the institutions' future rank" (p. 10). Similarly, Bednowitz (2000) found changes in USNWR ranks are highly related to admissions outcomes at MBA programs.

One might ask, "Why study changes in ranks?" One perspective is that, " . . . since we may change our methodology from year to year, we do not invite readers to track colleges' annual moves in the rankings" (Morse & Flanigan, 2001, online). Overall, 60% of students find newsmagazine college rankings to be not at all important, 30% cite rankings as somewhat important, and 11% rate them as very important in their college choices (McDonough et al., 1997). Studies find that rankings are primarily used by more well off students from college-educated families. The students who do not have schools with good guidance operations or knowledge about college from their parents are not using the rankings newsmagazines in their college choice decision-making (McDonough et al., 1997).

Alternatively, the rankings issues of the newsmagazines sell. Ehrenberg (2001) keenly noted that " . . . it is the change in the numerical rankings of institutions near the top of each institutional category, as well as the changes in the quartile rankings of some lower ranked institution from year to year that sells lots of copies of [USNWR] magazines" (p. 1). Bednowitz (2000) in his study of the impact of USNWR rankings on the Business Schools found that the recruiting choices of employers are not statistically related to a programs ranking for a given year. Rather, employers react exclusively to changes over time. Bednowitz further concludes that " . . . students may not be behaving in their best interest by reacting to single-year changes in rank . . . Based on employers' behavior, it makes more sense for a student to take a longer term view and attend a school which has been highly ranked for many years . . ., even if that school is not currently ranked highly" (p. 31). Ehrenberg (2001) finds that colleges' shifts in the rankings are a reflection of the competitiveness of the market segment where the institutions operate.

The Issue Addressed by the Current Study

Some would argue that such efforts should not be equated with direct improvements in institutions. Others might argue that there are overall benefits that stem from the efforts of *U. S. News and World Report*, and dozens of others, to perform a service for consumers. This paper does not deal directly with the issue of whether the time spent paying attention to college rankings is well spent in the sense that they lead directly to institutional improvements. However, the paper deals with the related issue of whether such efforts are well spent in the sense that they are likely to pay off in reaching the immediate goal of higher rankings. To state the issue another way, we asked the following questions: How often do changes in rankings occur? Do they frequently tend to improve? Are positive movements in rankings as likely as negative movements? This study is not intended to discourage those efforts but rather to provide an accurate picture of how much movement, whether rising or falling, has occurred historically. Such information is the best guide on how much movement, positive or negative, to expect in the future. It was hoped that the answers to these and related questions would help institutions to know whether their efforts to improve their rankings are likely to succeed.

Method

This part of the report summarizes the methods used as applied to the national liberal arts category of institutions. As will become evident, the replication study (involving Southern Regional Universities, to be described below) used very similar methods in order to insure that comparisons could be made between the two studies.

At the outset, we undertook a study of the rankings for 6 previous years in the *U.S. News and World Report* for nationally ranked four-year liberal arts colleges. Six years of rankings (1996 through 2001) gave the possibility of movement over five years: 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. Colleges could stay the same over all four years or change. If they changed, they could change up or down repeatedly in several possible combinations. (Note: the years named--1996-2001--or years of reference are dated one year after the date of the actual issues in which the rankings appear.)

Although the 2002 rankings were available well in advance of the 2001 ASHE national conference, we decided not to include those results for the liberal arts colleges' part of the study. Examination of the 2002 results revealed that a radical shift in methodology had occurred. Part of the change was the addition of dozens of institutions that had previously participated in other categories of U.S. News rankings. Our impression was that formerly distinct categories of institutions had been conflated in the new rankings. Thus, it was our impression that the new data for liberal arts institutions warranted a study in its own right. We have not had the leisure to undertake such a study. However, as a "work in progress," in the near future our study will extend into the special circumstances and findings associated with the 2002 rankings of liberal arts colleges.

The method used involved entering the names of all colleges and their tier assignments (1-4) for each year into a spreadsheet. For tier one assignments only, we made entries of the unique institutional rank (1-*n*, where *n* was the lowest rank), as published by *U. S. News and World Report.* Sorting the spreadsheet by college and by year within colleges afforded an opportunity to identify cross-tier movements. Most of the findings reported below stem from these simple steps and the various counts and other calculations that they made possible.

Results and Discussion – National Liberal Arts Colleges

If one looks at the probability of any changes taking place out of all opportunities for change to have occurred, that value turned out to be .14. In other words, change occurred in 14 percent of the opportunities. Therefore most of the year-to-year comparisons showed no change. The probability of no change from one year to the next was 1.00 minus .14 or .86, i.e., 86 percent of the opportunities. Further, the probability of a change (.14) was nearly evenly divided between rising and falling, with the probability of reaching a higher tier in the next being approximately .08 and that of declining being approximately .07.

Looking at the institutions, there were 162 represented over the 6 years. That is only slightly higher than the 160 that would be expected if there were 40 in each tier each year and there were no newcomers. In fact, there were several, but only very few, that appeared less than 6 times. The breakdown is shown in Figure 1.

The obvious implication is that, once included among the "best liberal arts colleges," an institution is likely to stay there. The other side of this positive conclusion is that movement within the 160 or so best is extremely slow and difficult. There were 91 institutions that showed no movement at all over 6 appearances. This conservatism is shown most of all in tier 1, which is partly due to the "ceiling" effect; simply put, tier 1 institutions cannot rise to a higher tier. However, tier 4 membership is also conservative, even though the institutions making up that tier are at most risk of falling off of the "best colleges" list completely.

Since the bottom 3 tiers are not ranked, it is difficult to determine the average movement per institution over the 4 years of possible change. Such study fell outside the resources of time available for the current study. Fortunately, there was a shortcut to making a relevant estimate. The shortcut was to calculate the average change in rankings

within tier 1 between 1996 and 2000. The average change over four years of the 40 or so institutions in tier 1 turned out to be 1.94 positions. (Note: This result was calculated for 1996-2000 and has not been updated with 2001 data.)

A finding of 1.94 positions is interesting because it represents only 5 percent of the range between ranks of 1 and 40. Inspection of the rankings from year to year showed that they were very tightly confined, going up or down at most only a few places. Two colleges with the greatest upward movements, from the 1996 to the 2000 rankings, moved up 10 places. A third college moved up 7 positions.

If movement happened similarly within the other three (unranked) tiers, we may expect that movement between tiers might be fairly rare. However, when considered over all 6 years, movement up or down was not particularly rare. Considering the movement from tier 4 to tier 3, there were 49 institutions that had the opportunity to make that movement during at least one year in the period 1996-2001. Of these 49 institutions, there were 19 that did move up at least once. This number was equivalent to approximately 39 percent. It should be borne in mind that this rate is fairly low on a per year basis. Over six years (five transitions), the average per year upward shift was slightly less than 8 percent.

However, even if movement was not particularly rare, one needs to know whether the overall upward movement tends to be balanced by downward movements. In other words, can the overall movement pattern be described as " zero sum," with upward movement of some colleges balanced and compensated for by the downward movement of other or (in many cases) the same colleges. One relevant observation was the following. While 19 colleges moved from tier 4 to tier 3, 19 also made the reverse trip from tier 3 to tier 4.

There were 62 institutions in tier 3 that had the opportunity to move up to tier 2 between 1996 and 2001. There were 27 that actually moved up. Thus, again such movement was not unusual. The percentage of upward movers over all six years was 43.5. On a per year basis, that is slightly more than 8 percent per year. There were also 28 that moved down from tier 2 to tier 3, suggesting again a "zero sum" situation. Again, many of the same colleges that moved up also moved down.

The number of institutions that had multiple movements (both up and down) was examined. Of the 62 institutions that experienced any transitions from one tier to another, those transitions could be divided into four categories. The first category consisted of simple reversals; that is, the ranking went up in one year and down in a subsequent year, or vice versa. There were 25 (40.3 percent of the "movers") that fell into that category. The second category was of institutions with 1½ transitions; i.e., there was a shift (up or down) that was cancelled out by the reverse shift and then reinstated by a third shift back to the original tier. There were 8 transitions falling into that category (12.9 percent). Third, there was one "double reversal," consisting of a change from tier 3 to 2 and back to 3, followed by a shift to 4 and back to 3. Finally, there were two special cases. One institution was assigned to tier 4, although it had refused to provide data to U.S. News. Subsequently the institution rose to tier 1, and still later fell to tier 2. Finally, one institution experienced a "double slide," from 2 to 3 and then from 3 to 4. In all, 36 of the 62 institutions (or 58.1 percent) had multiple movements within the 6 years.

Another related question is how much the institutions that rose (or fell) in their tier assignments actually changed in rank relative to other institutions. Since U.S. News does not publish detailed ranks except within tier 1, the existing data do not permit an easy answer to that question. However, we may turn again to tier 1 to find the answer to an analogous

question at that level. (The following test was done for 1996-2000 data and has not been updated for 1996-2001.) To address this question, we created an artificial division within tier 1 between institutions with a rank greater than 20 (i.e. 21-40) and those with a rank less than or equal to 20 (i.e. 1-20). Let us call them tier 1A (most premier) and tier 1B (less premier). If we look for movement between the two new groups, we can measure the change in rank of those colleges that moved in either direction. It turns out there were only two institutions that rose in rank. One moved from rank 21 to 11 and another rose from 23 to 18. There were two other close calls: one moved from 34 to 24, thus approaching the ficutious tier 1A status. Another moved from 19 to 16, all within tier 1A. That college was close to qualifying only in the sense that its starting point was close to the border between the two sub-tiers. Only one college made the reverse movement from tier 1A to tier 1B. That institution moved from rank 18 in 1996 to rank 23 in 2000. One close call had movement 17 to 18 during that period, but fell to 21 in 1999.

Results and Discussion – Southern Regional Universities (Master's Level)

This part of the paper summarizes the results of a study of the rankings for the six years (1996, 1998-2002)[2] in the U.S. News and World Report (USNWR) for Southern Regional Universities-Master's. Six years of rankings gave the possibility of five cross-tier movements: 1996-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002. Universities

[2] The researchers were not able to obtain 1997 data.

could stay the same over all years or change. If they changed, they could change up or down repeatedly in several combinations.

If one looks at the probability of any changes taking place out of all opportunities for change to have occurred, the value turned out to be .19. In other words, change occurred in 19 percent of the opportunities. Therefore most of the year-to-year comparisons showed no change. The probability of no change from one year to the next was 1.00 minus .19 or .81, i.e., 81 percent of the opportunities. The probability of a change (.19) was somewhat unevenly divided between rising and falling, with probability of reaching a higher tier being .105 and that of declining being .086.

Looking at the institutions, there were 143 represented over the six years. The breakdown was as follows: 111 institutions appeared over all six years, 11 institutions appeared five times, 1 institution appeared four times, 2 institutions appeared two times, and 18 institutions appeared once.

Out of 111 institutions that appeared over all six years, 47 institutions showed no between-tier movement at all over six appearances. The conservatism is shown most of all in tier 1 (20 institutions did not move), which is partly due to a "ceiling effect."

Since the bottom 3 tiers are not ranked, it is difficult to determine the average movement per institution over the 5 years of possible change. As with the examination of the liberal arts category, such a study fell outside the resources of time available for the current study. We used a shortcut to making a relevant estimate. The shortcut was to calculate the average change in tier 1 between 2000 and 2002. The average change turned out to be 2.3 positions.

A finding of 2.3 positions is interesting because it represents only 6 percent of the range between ranks of 1 and 38. The greatest upward movement, from the 2000 to the 2002 rankings, was 11 positions. The greatest downward movement was 9 positions.

Movement over all 6 years (1996-2002)

If movement happened similarly within the other three (unranked) tiers, we may expect that movement between tiers should be fairly rare. However, when considered over all 6 years, movement up and down was not particular rare. Considering the movement from tier 4 to tier 3, there were 41 institutions that had the opportunity to make that movement during at least one year during the period 1996-2002. Of these 41 institutions, 21 moved up at least once. This number is equivalent to approximately 50 percent.

However, even if movement was not particularly rare, one needs to know whether the overall upward movements tend to be balanced by downward movements. In other words, can the overall movement pattern be described as "zero sum", with upward movement of some colleges balanced and compensated by the downward movement of other or (in many cases) the same colleges. One relevant observation was the following: while 21 institutions moved from tier 4 to tier 3, 21 also made the reverse shift from tier 3 to tier 4.

There were 51 institutions in tier 3 that had the opportunity to move up to tier 2 at least once between 1996 and 2002. Of these, there were 18 that moved up at least once. Thus, such movement was not unusual. However, there were also 16 that moved down from tier 2 to tier 3 at least once. Many of the same institutions that moved up also moved down.

There were 50 institutions in tier 2 that had the opportunity to move up to tier 1 at least once between 1996 and 2002. Of these, there were 16 that moved up at least once.

However, there were also 10 that moved down from tier 1 to tier 2 at least once between 1996 and 2002.

A Comparison of Movement Between the 1996 rankings and the 2002 rankings

If we look at the movement of the 111 institutions that appeared both in 1996 and 2002, 75 institutions did not change their tiers, 25 moved up, and 11 institutions moved down.

There were 31 institutions that were in tier 4 who had, theoretically, the opportunity to move up between the 1996 and 2002 rankings. One university moved to a different category (National Universities). There were seven institutions that moved from tier 4 to tier 3. There were two institutions that moved from tier 4 to tier 2. This number (i.e., 9 institutions from 4-to-3 and 4-to-2) is equivalent to 30 percent or about 1 in 3.

If membership within the Best Colleges list is conservative, changing only rarely, and a relatively small number rise in rank, it is possible that the overall movement pattern within the list can be best described as "zero sum". That is, upward movement of some universities is balanced and compensated for by the downward movement of other universities. For example, while the seven universities moved from tier 4 to tier 3, six universities made the reverse trip from tier 3 to tier 4.

Again there were 31 institutions in tier 3 that had, theoretically, the opportunity to move up between 1996 and 2002. Two universities moved to a different category (National Universities). One institution dropped from the USNWR rankings. There were six universities that moved up between 1996 and 2002. Further, there were three universities that moved down from tier 2 to tier 3 between 1996 and 2002.

Again there were 31 institutions in tier 2 that had, theoretically, the opportunity to move up between 1996 and 2002. Three universities changed their categories; two joined

the National Universities category, and one moved to the Comprehensive Colleges category. Ten universities moved from tier 2 to tier 1 between 1996 and 2002. Further, there were two universities that moved down from tier 1 to tier 2 between 1996 and 2002.

There were 32 institutions in tier 1. Six institutions changed their categories: three moved to the Liberal Arts Colleges category, two moved to the National Universities category, and one moved to the Comprehensive Colleges category. To further analyze movement in tier 1, we created an artificial division within tier 1 between institutions with a rank greater than 15 (i.e., 16-32) and those with a rank less than or equal to 15 (i.e., 1-15). Let us call them tier 1A (most premier) and tier 1B (less premier). If we look for movement between the two new groups, we can measure the change in rank of those colleges that moved in either direction. It turns out that out of 24 institutions that stayed in tier 1 over all six years, only one institution moved from 1B to 1A. And one institution made the reverse movement from tier 1A to 1B.

Implications and Future Research

The information presented in this paper provides one important source of guidance for institutions wishing to improve their rankings. In general, there is sufficient stability within the rankings to make one take a somewhat skeptical view toward efforts to improve an institution's rankings. At the same time, the same finding bodes well for those institutions that happen to be content with their rankings because they are as high as they can be or as high as college representatives expect them to become. Such institutions can afford perhaps to relax their efforts in regard to raising or maintaining their high status as far as these rankings are concerned. However, this general conclusion, while defensible in light of the results, should not be construed as discouraging the efforts of those institutions that would like to improve their rankings. Neither should the results be construed as offering an

excuse for complacency among those institutions that happen to be content with the rankings that they already possess.

Before coming to those conclusions, several cautions should be observed. First, it is exceedingly important for an institution to determine its approximate rank within the tier to which it has been assigned. (For tier 1 institutions this information is provided and easily retrieved.) Without such information, it is impossible to determine whether efforts to improve are likely to bear fruit within less than 10 years. It could be argued that the institutions that showed the most movement (often multiple times, both up and down) had ranks that were close to the tier margins or borders. If so, the majority of institutions that did not move probably had a longer "distance" (in ranks) to move before a change in tier status would become manifest. By such reasoning, it appears important to know approximately where an institution ranks (i.e., in detail, not merely in its tier assignment) as useful information when attempting to raise an institution's rank. Equally true, it is impossible to know without estimating those rankings whether the institution is at risk of moving backward in tier assignment or falling off of the list altogether.

A second caution is that institutions would do well to reflect upon what they would do if the rankings did not exist at all. They should consider whether the efforts expended to improve or maintain rank or tier assignment are substantially the same as the efforts that would be expended if *U. S. News and World Report* were not in this business. If the answer to that question is that the efforts would be substantially the same, then it might make better sense for the institution to use scarce resources to pursue the goal of improving its rank. Those efforts could more easily be defended to the degree that they merely duplicated the efforts that would be expended if there were no rankings to drive them.

Regarding future research, beyond suggestions made above, we recommend the following program:

1. Replicate the study for other groups/categories of institutions.
2. Identify what market segments (classification, region) are the most competitive (i.e., have higher probability of change).
3. Utilizing six-year averages, compare movers and non-movers, and upward movers versus downward movers. Run discriminant analysis to determine the linear combination of independent variables (e.g., changes in spending patterns) which best discriminates between groups. Similarly, logistic regression can be utilized to contrast the groups.

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7. Percentage of institutions that appeared in all six rankings and made movements

8. Movement of 111 universities-master's (south), that appeared in all six years, between 1996 and 2002

9. Movement of 111 universities-master's (south) that changed tiers between 1996 and 2002

FIGURE 1

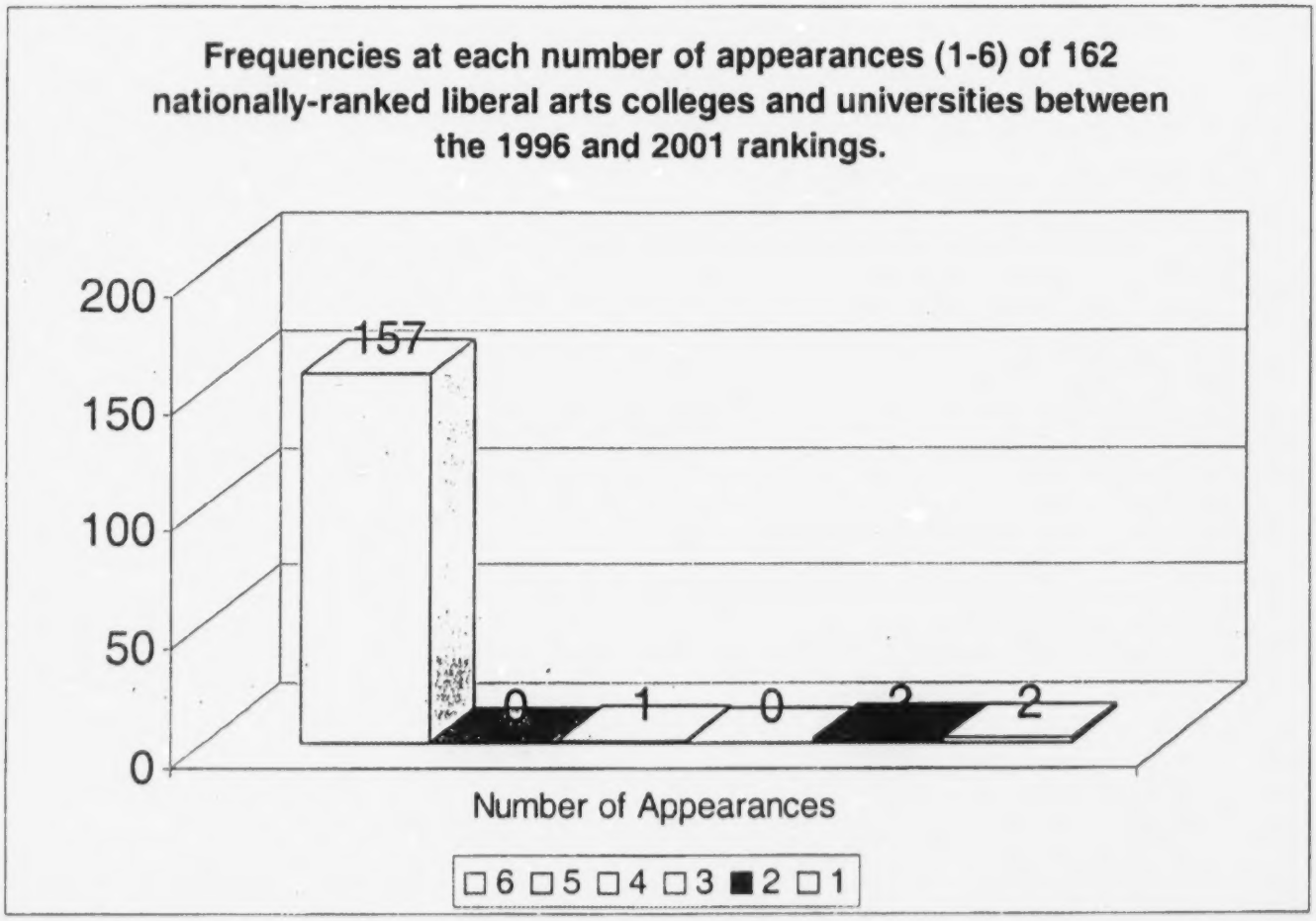

Frequencies at each number of appearances (1-6) of 162 nationally-ranked liberal arts colleges and universities between the 1996 and 2001 rankings.
200
150
100
50
0
157
0
1
0
2
2
Number of Appearances
6 5 4 3 2 1

FIGURE 2

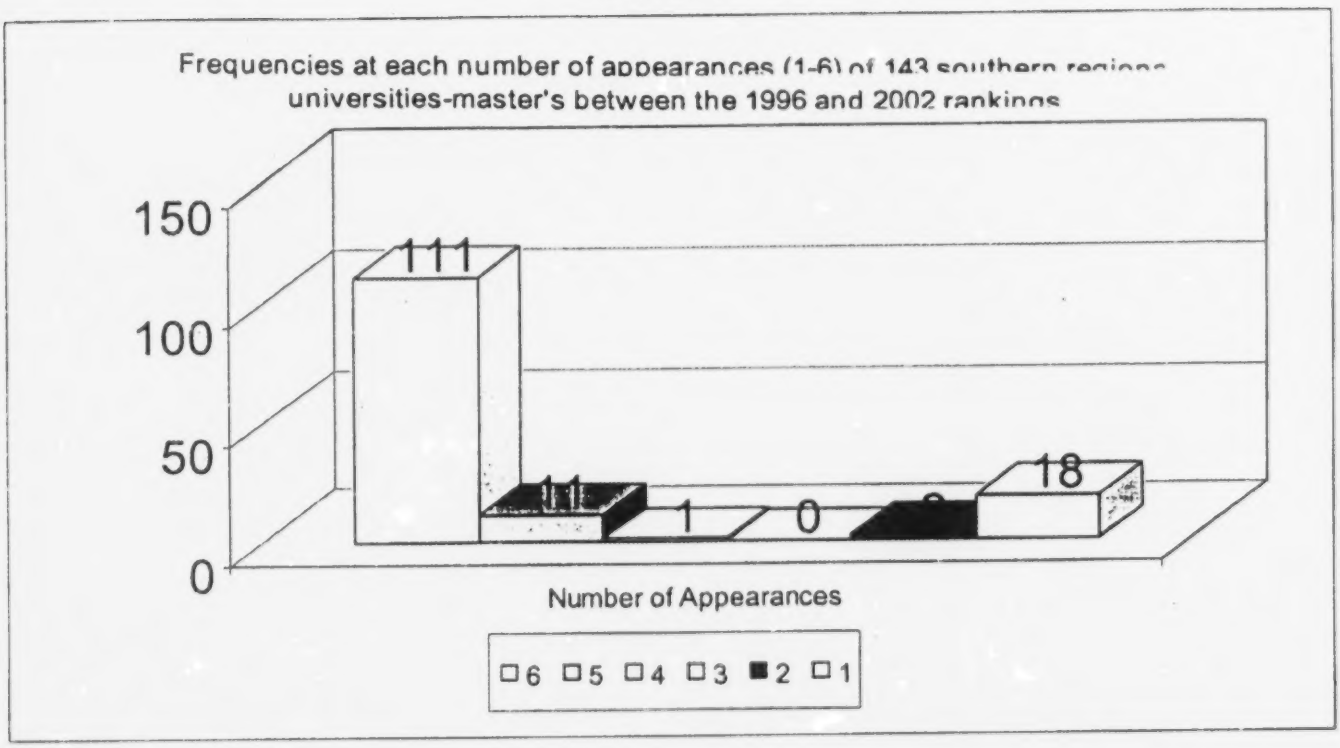

Frequencies at each number of appearances (1-6) of 143 southern regions
universities-master's between the 1996 and 2002 rankings
150
100
50
0
111
1
0
18
Number of Appearances
6 5 4 3 2 1

FIGURE 3

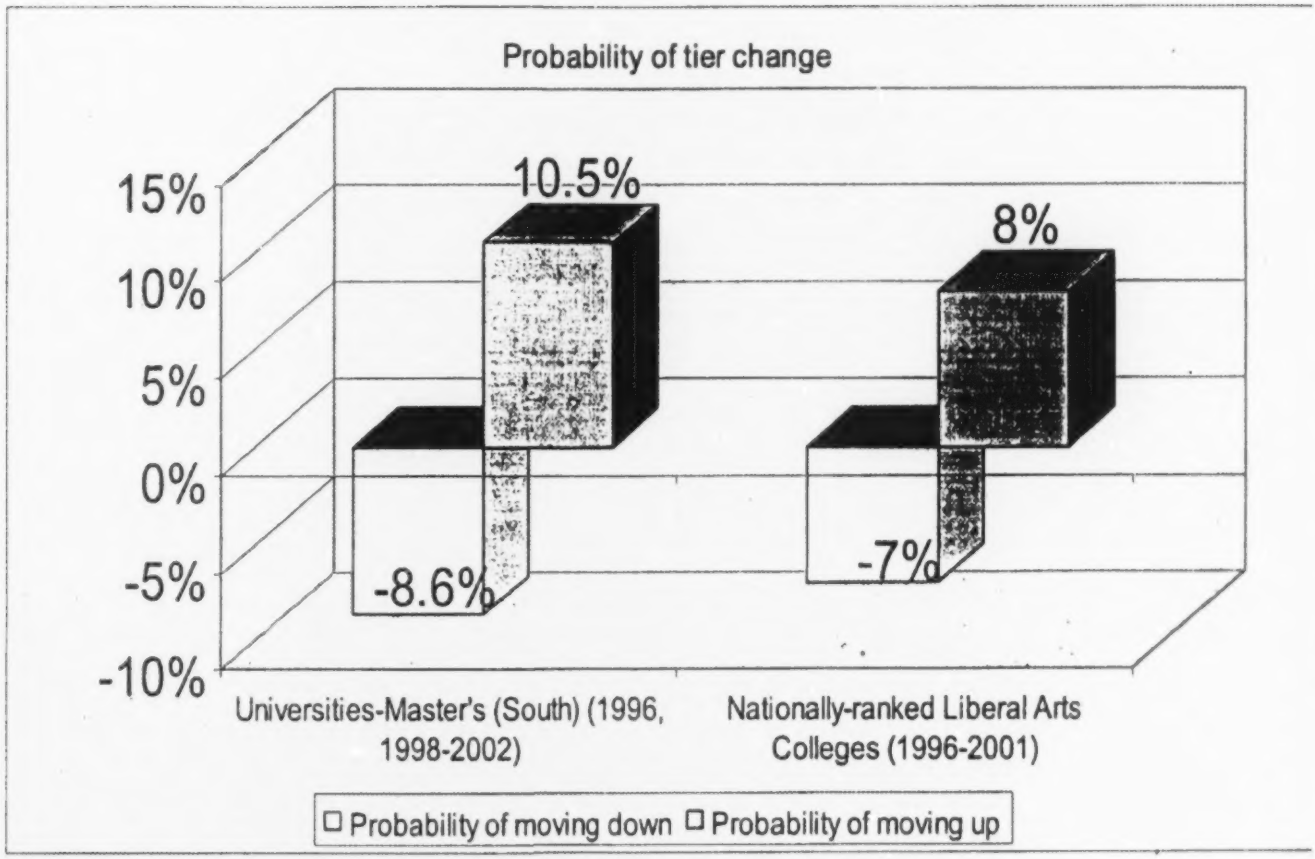

Probability of tier change
15%
10%
5%
0%
-5%
-10%
10.5%
8%
-8.6%
-7%
Universities-Master's (South) (1996, 1998-2002)
Nationally-ranked Liberal Arts Colleges (1996-2001)
Probability of moving down
Probability of moving up

FIGURE 4

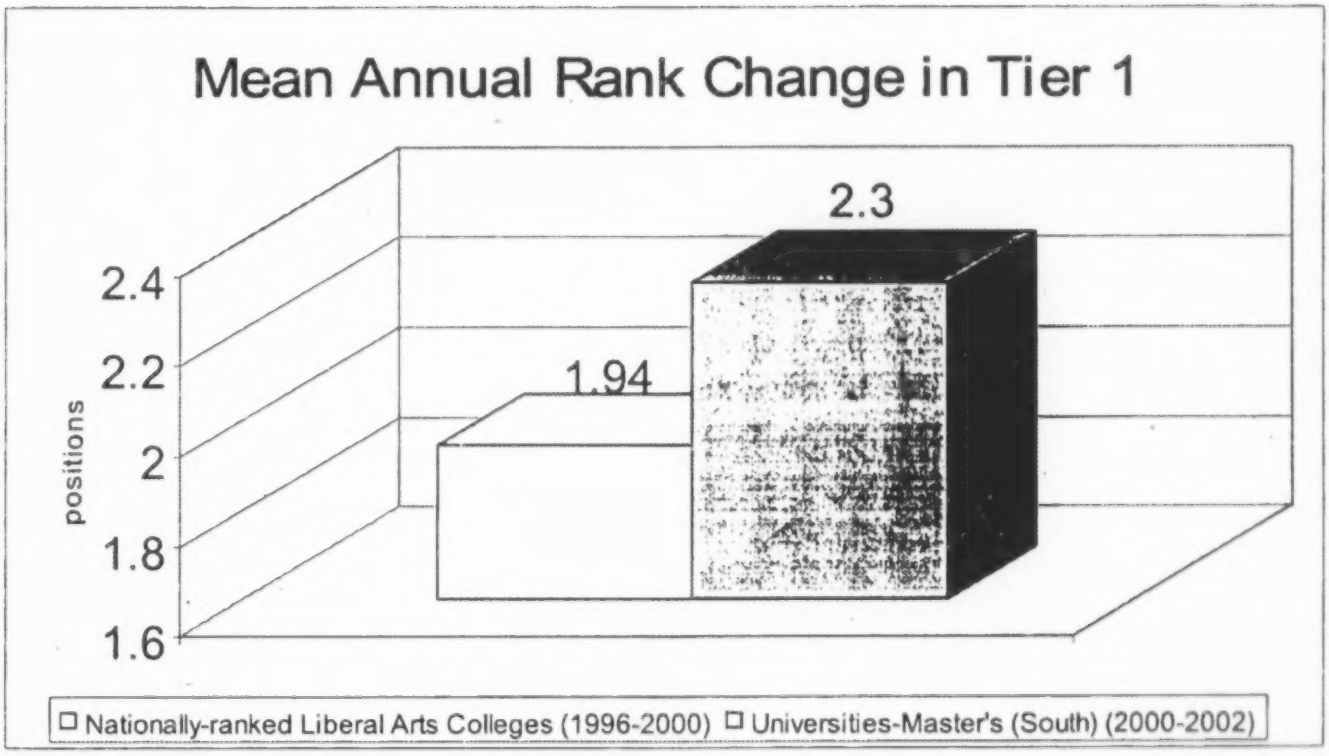

Mean Annual Rank Change in Tier 1
2.3
1.94
2.4
2.2
2
1.8
1.6
positions
Nationally-ranked Liberal Arts Colleges (1996-2000)
Universities-Master's (South) (2000-2002)

FIGURE 5

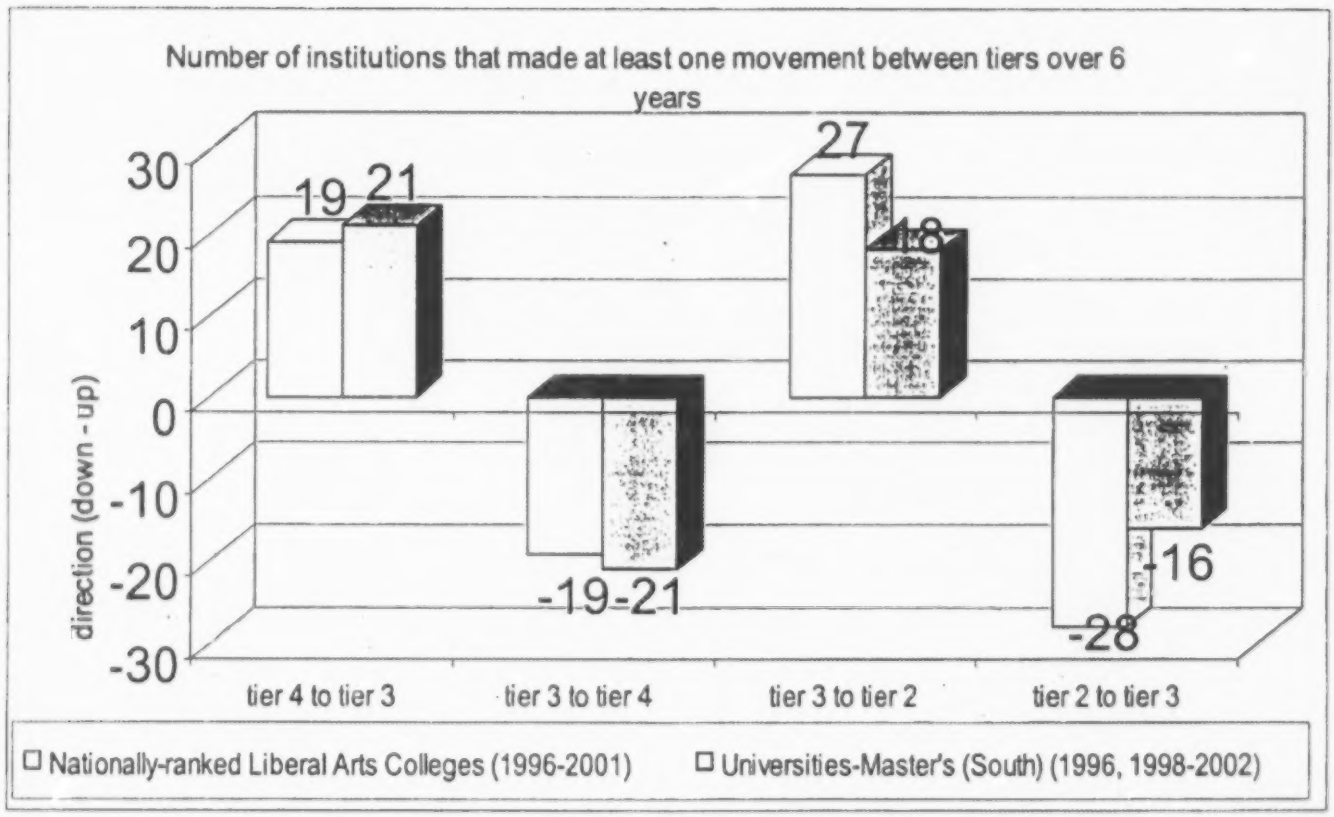

Number of institutions that made at least one movement between tiers over 6 years
direction (down - up)
30
20
10
0
-10
-20
-30
19
21
-19
-21
27
18
-28
-16
tier 4 to tier 3
tier 3 to tier 4
tier 3 to tier 2
tier 2 to tier 3
Nationally-ranked Liberal Arts Colleges (1996-2001)
Universities-Master's (South) (1996, 1998-2002)

FIGURE 6

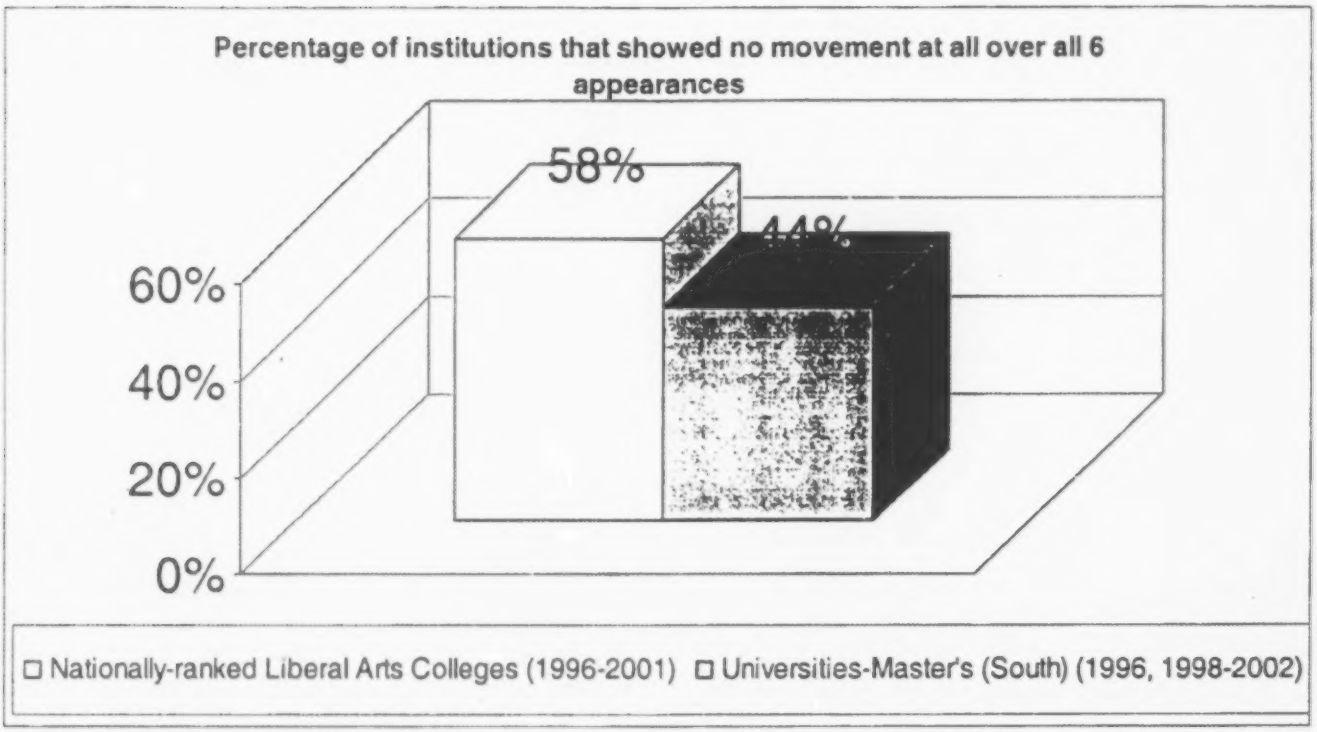

Percentage of institutions that showed no movement at all over all 6 appearances
58%
44%
60%
40%
20%
0%
Nationally-ranked Liberal Arts Colleges (1996-2001)
Universities-Master's (South) (1996, 1998-2002)

FIGURE 7

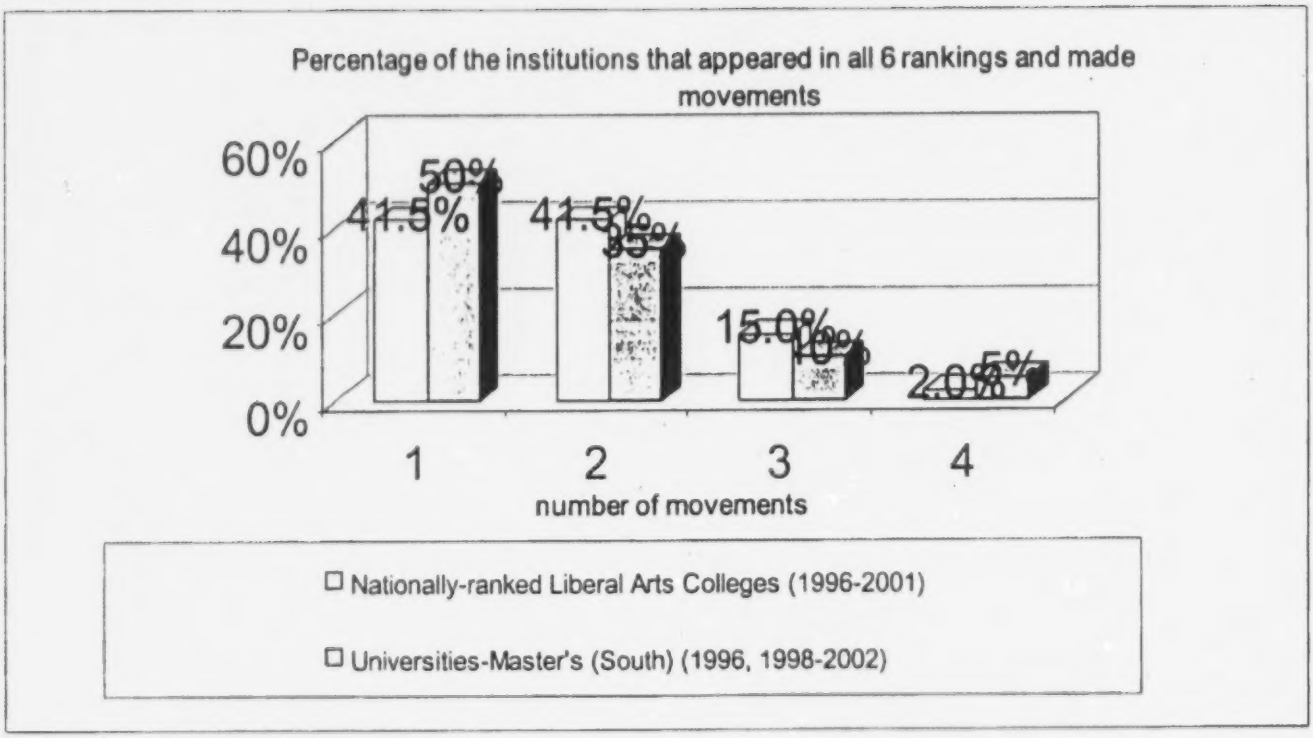

Percentage of the institutions that appeared in all 6 rankings and made movements
60%
40%
20%
0%
41.5%
50%
41.5%
15.0%
1
2
3
4
number of movements
Nationally-ranked Liberal Arts Colleges (1996-2001)
Universities-Master's (South) (1996, 1998-2002)

FIGURE 8

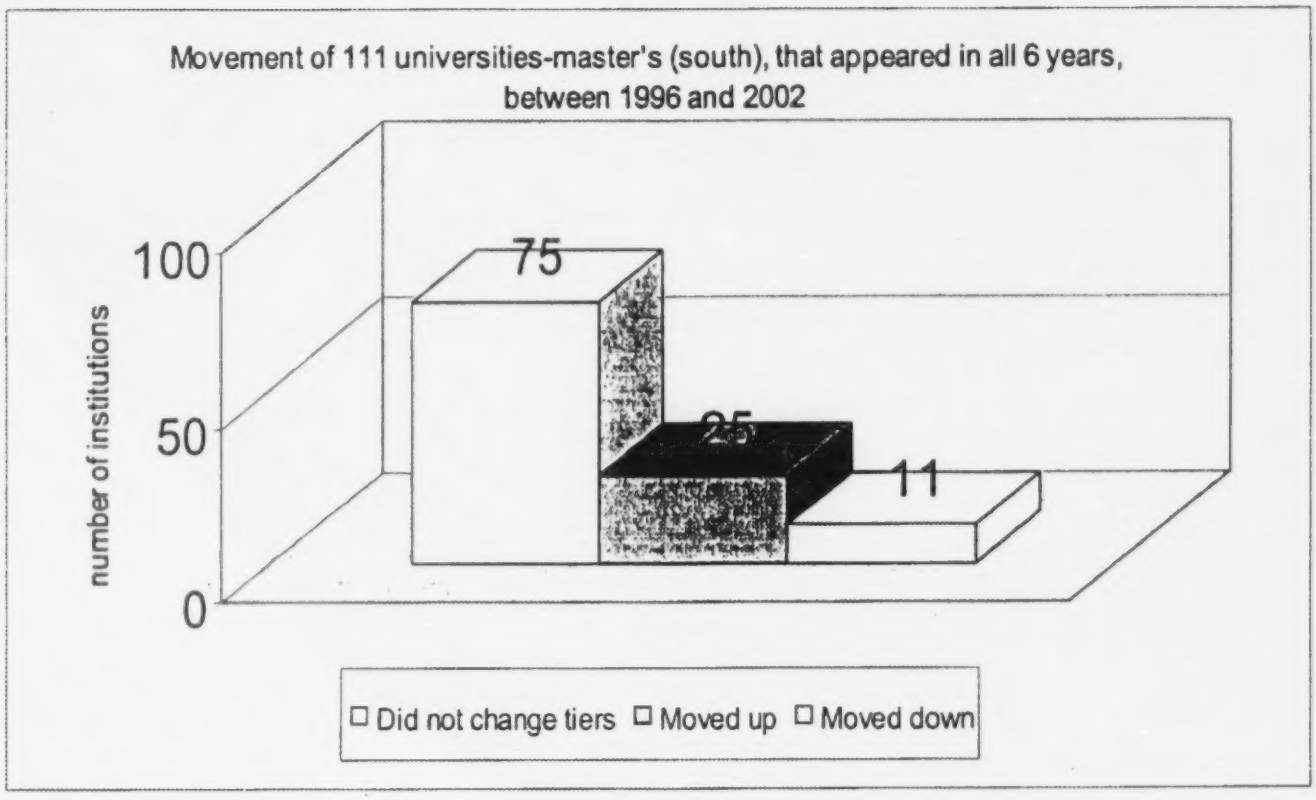
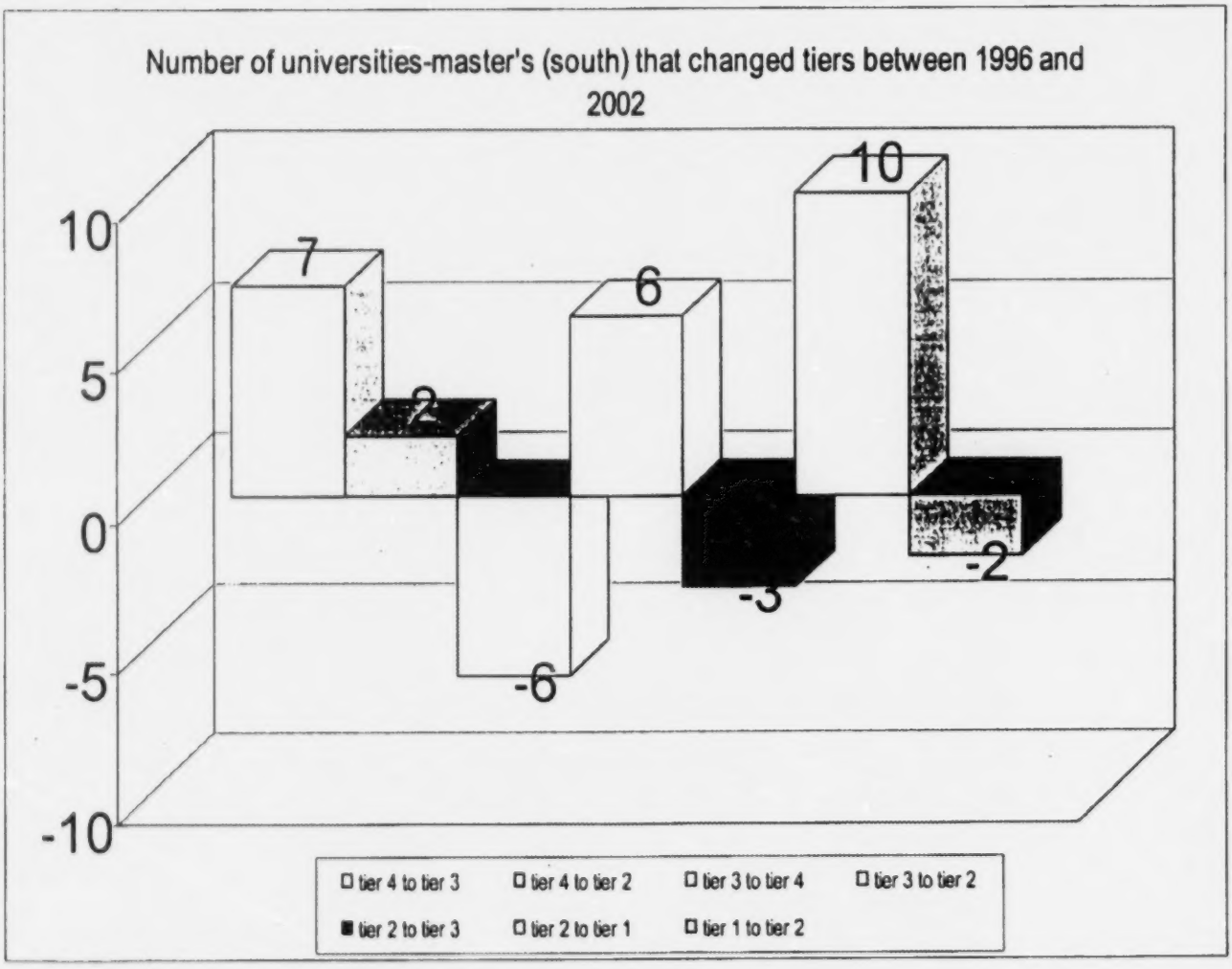

Movement of 111 universities-master's (south), that appeared in all 6 years, between 1996 and 2002
number of institutions
100
50
0
75
25
11
Did not change tiers
Moved up
Moved down

FIGURE 9


Number of universities-master's (south) that changed tiers between 1996 and 2002
10
5
0
-5
-10
7
2
-6
6
-3
10
-2
tier 4 to tier 3
tier 4 to tier 2
tier 3 to tier 4
tier 3 to tier 2
tier 2 to tier 3
tier 2 to tier 1
tier 1 to tier 2